

Comics: Meet the Artist Signe Wilkinson Editorial Cartoonist

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http://discuss.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/zforum/05/style_cartoon040105.htm

Join Washington Post Comics page editor Suzanne Tobin online once each month to discuss the comics pages. From artists to writers to editors, Tobin is joined by a different guest for each show. This week, Tobin will be joined by Pulitzer Prize-winning editorial cartoonist Signe Wilkinson.

Join Tobin and Wilkinson online on Friday, April 1, at 1 p.m. ET to discuss the art of cartooning.

Submit questions either before or during the discussion.

Editor's Note: washingtonpost.com moderators retain editorial control over Live Online discussions and choose the most relevant questions for guests and hosts; guests and hosts can decline to answer questions.

Rockville, Md.: Editorial cartoonists inevitably make someone angry. How do you feel when you get attacked by your subject?

Signe Wilkinson: Oh, I love being called racist, insensitive, and idiotic. I particularly like it when readers (mostly via the miracle of e-mail) wish my children would die of cancer. Perhaps one reason women don't go into this biz is that you need really thick skin.

Bethesda, Md.: Thanks for taking my question. I know there has been quite a bit of discussion lately about the lack of women writers on the editorial pages of the nation's newspapers. You and Ann Telnaes are the only women editorial cartoonists that I've seen. How do you feel about being a minority in your profession?

Signe Wilkinson: I don't consider myself a minority. Just a cartoonist with an opinion. Having said that, I probably take on more chic issues than the guys do and I don't mind drawing about mammograms. I keep

thinking that just as there are more and more women politicians, there will be more and more women cartoonists. Unfortunately, there are fewer and fewer jobs for cartoonists of either sex so it's not exactly a growth industry.

Harrisburg, Pa.: As an Inquirer reader living out in Harrisburg, it is a pleasure to read you are appearing at this discussion. What do you see are your responsibilities as a political cartoonist? You obviously have more leeway than reporters, so you are allowed to comically exaggerate. You are allowed to show an opinion. At the same time, there are many who skim the news and whose primary knowledge of some news items will be what they see in your cartoon. Do you see yourself as an educator of the public, or do you see yourself primarily to entertain and make us laugh at the inconsistencies of news events, or what do you see as your role as a editorial page cartoonist?

Signe Wilkinson: Yikes! How about asking for the meaning of life? First, I work for the Philadelphia Daily News, not the broadsheet upstairs. In my job, I definatley DO NOT see myself as an educator. My responsibility is to give my opinion on the news using pictures rather than words. It's been my experience that people don't pick up a cartoon, smack themselves on the forehead and say, "Well, now I'm going to vote the way this cartoon says I should." Mostly, I think cartoons reassure people who already agree with them that they aren't alone.

County Line: hello: How come I've never seen your work in the Saturday Post "all-star, around-the-country" highlights?

2. As Post readers continue to age, are the comics going to keep gettting smaller and smaller? Thanks.

Signe Wilkinson: You'll have to ask the Post editors how they pick what they pick. Naturally, I should be in every round-up with four out of the five cartoons.

I hope the comics won't get smaller--it's not good for the old readers. The Post has about the best comics pages in the country, so you should appreciate them while you've got them.

Falls Church, Va.: Did you ever consider doing a non-editorial cartoon? Something for the comics pages?

Signe Wilkinson: Yes, but I'm stuck in my rut. I used to do mulch-based cartoons for Organic Gardening magazine and did a 1999 calendar about vegetable gardening. I'd love to do more on that issue.

Washington, D.C.: How did you get started in editorial cartooning?

Signe Wilkinson: I started as a reporter covering the really big stories breaking out at the school board meetings and township supervisor meetings I got assigned. It was great but I couldn't spell, a problem almost solved by cartooning.

Arlington, VA: Can you tell us who your influences were? And also your favorite cartoonists who weren't necessarily influences on your style? Either editorial or not, and still practicing or not?

Signe Wilkinson: I grew up on the Mad Magazine sensibility --particularly Sergio Aragones -- and loved the New Yorker cartoons. Tony Auth was an early hero and there are a host of other cartoonists whose work I like for a variety of different reasons. Ed Sorel, whose style couldn't be more different from my own, mentored me in his own loveably brutal way -- insulting every line I drew as he corrected, commented and improved them. It's hard to get a good critique and I'm grateful to him for taking the

time on me. Signe

Suzanne Tobin: Signe, what was your reaction to winning the Pulitzer Prize?

Signe Wilkinson: It's like having Ed MacMahon coming to your door with the publisher's sweepstakes. YOU HAVE WON!!! There are so few cartoonists and so many prizes, if you stick around long enough, you're sure to get one. Cartooning is so well-regarded in the profession that it's ranked right around the Pulitzer prize for hair coloring.

alexandria, va: "I used to do mulch-based cartoons ...I'd love to do more on that issue."

great, can we have some manure & compost cartoons about our local industry? I can see the foundation to the rose garden now.

Signe Wilkinson: Isn't your local industry government?

Prickly City: Sorry Signe Wilkinson, as this doesn't question doesn't pertain to you.

Ms. Tobin, Can you please move Prickly City to the same page as Tom Toles or somewhere in the paper more appropriate? Mr. Stantis Doesn't even make an attempt at humor -- he simply wants to preach his conservative viewpoint in pictures (which would contrast nicely with Tom Toles, I think).

Signe Wilkinson: Tom Toles is perfect in all regards so needs no balance.

Suzanne Tobin: I understand you were president of the American Association of Editorial Cartoonists? Besides giving you solitary scribblers a place to get together once a year, what does the AAEC do?

Signe Wilkinson: The AAEC keeps cartoonists up to date with each other's lawsuits, disputes with editors, firings, paper closings, divorces, etc. It's also a place young cartoonists can get in touch with geezer cartoonists. I think the organization is trying do more represent the profession to the rest of the industry.

College Park: I see that you're syndicated by the Washington Post Writers Group. How did that come to be? Do you hold the rights to your cartoons, or does the Daily News?

Signe Wilkinson: The Washington Post Wrters Group asked me and I accepted though, as a previous query noted, it doesn't particularly

help getting onto the Post pages. I hold the rights to my cartoons, for they're worth.

Suzanne Tobin: Can you describe for us one of your favorite cartoons?

Signe Wilkinson: I could but what's the point? Cartoons must be seen.

Washington, DC: Hi. I enjoy your work. Just curious: how do you pronounce your first name?

Signe Wilkinson: Like CIGar and KNEE.
You have exquisite taste in cartoons.

Suzanne Tobin: Re: Prickly City. I don't understand why readers want to keep the comics pages "pure" from any sort of political or societal comment. Cartoons like Prickly City and Boondocks are not appropriate for the editorial page because they are not ALWAYS political in nature. Is it that threatening to have something thought-provoking on the comics pages? Whether I agree with the cartoonists' viewpoint or not, I believe they have the right to speak their mind. We get similar complaints about Boondocks and Doonesbury. The only reason Doonesbury is on a different page is because when he came back from his sabbatical he had a clause in his contract that newspapers could not run the cartoon any smaller than a certain size, and we can't fit that size on the comics pages without making it a layout nightmare. And only Garry Trudeau can get away with something like that, believe me.

New Jersey: Since editorial cartooning is not exactly a "growth profession" what direction would you advise a young cartoonist to head in?

Signe Wilkinson: Go to the internet and see what they need. Mark Fiore does fabulous animated cartoons as do a couple of other people. I'm way too old and untrainable to master the skills. Start a magazine or newspaper and use your own cartoons in it. It worked for Benjamin Franklin. It's just a problem if you want to get PAID for doing

cartoons. Plenty of places will take them for free.

It's always chastening to talk to cartoonists from other countries --particularly third world --where cartoonists just do their cartoons because they want to make their world better, fairer or more just. Naturally, there's no Pulitzer prize for that.

Foggy Bottom: What do you think of all the Red State-Blue State discussion in the media? Do you really think that our country is that polarized? IF I believe everything I read, it sounds like a Civil War is imminent with the right to lifers versus the rest of the country...

Signe Wilkinson: Red and blue work extremely well for color cartoons but not much in real life. Of course lavender is the mixture of the two and that color's been taken.

As the Terri Schiavo fiasco pointed out, there are all sorts of crossover places in American life.

Baltimore: What would you say is the ratio in your cartoons between national and local issues? Herblock had the advantage that his cartoons were always local. How do you and your editors decide which issue to tackle?

Signe Wilkinson: Ah, Herblock. When certain issues come up, I'm still mad that I can't think past some of his classic images.

In Philadelphia where I work, there is a huge trial involving pretty much the entire city government, there's a big spike in murder, and we're having gambling shoved down our throats so there are plenty of things to do locally. Also, my paper considers Camden a foreign country so most of our readers are clued into local issues.

Brookland, DC: What's your creative process? Are you caffeine-powered like so many of the other cartoonists that have been on this chat? Or do you just keep on news radio or TV and wait to feel REALLY angry?

Signe Wilkinson: Ummm.... those are all good ideas. I should drink

more coffee and listen to more radio but I usually just get my ideas from reading the paper and hoping there is some good, vivid writing in it that will turn on the switch in my brain. One of my favorite recent cartoons came from a discussion among friends about living wills in which one of them said he was going to get his wishes tattooed on his arm. I took it from there.

Suzanne Tobin: Signe, I understand you will be having an exhibit of your work in Philadelphia soon. When and where is that?

Signe Wilkinson: Next October or November at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Everyone invited. In the meantime, people can see my cartoons at the Phillynews website, at the Washington Post Writers Group website, at Signetoons.com or... by buying the Daily News. The last small gesture might preserve one more editorial cartooning job.

Suzanne Tobin: Thanks so much, Signe. We'll look forward to that exhibit. I hope everyone will join us again April 29 for another edition of "Comics: Meet the Artist."

Signe Wilkinson: I'm off to row before the next monsoon hits. It was nice chatting but what a bunch of softball questions! People must just be nicer in Washington than here in the provinces. Signe